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## OUR ANCESTRY LINGUISTIC<sup>1</sup>

By J. E. HOLLINGSWORTH  
Washburn College

Beneath the green sod of the surface of most modern languages lie dead bones. A language dies, but it does not generally all die. When the group of people who spoke it has for any reason become scattered or extinct, and the language no longer functions as a living organism, it is said to be dead. But a series of dialects may have sprung up in its place, widely spoken and bearing resemblance. The fossilized remains of a past civilization may record a pinnacle of advance in science, a norm for the art and architecture of succeeding generations. Or the dead language may have transmitted a sacred literature, a great system of philosophy, a legal code. In such cases a language has clothed itself with immortality.

Will the Hebrew Scriptures or the New Testament die? Will the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, the *Divine Comedy* perish from the earth; *Antigone*, *Faust*, or *King Lear* be forgotten? The author of *World Literature* (chap. ii) says:

I start from the position that our English civilization is the product of two main factors, the gradual union of which has made us what we are. . . . The one is the ancient Hellenic civilization embodied in the classical literature of Greece and Rome. The other is that special strain of Hebrew civilization which is crystallized in that literature we call the Bible. Our science, our art, our philosophy, our politics, are, in the main, the continuation of processes commenced by the ancient Greeks. But in our spiritual nature we are not

<sup>1</sup> For matters of English philology and language history, touched on in this paper in a cursory manner, the following books will be found useful: Bradley, *The Making of English* (Macmillan, 1904), Earle, *Philology of the English Tongue* (Clarendon Press, 1891), Emerson, *History of the English Language* (Macmillan, 1894), Greenough and Kittredge, *Words and Their Ways in English* (Macmillan, 1901), Jespersen, *Growth and Structure of the English Language* (Teubner, 1918), Meiklejohn, *History of the English Language*, Part III (D. C. Heath, 1906), Oertel, *Lectures on the Study of Language* (Scribners, 1902), Skeat, *Principles of Etymology* (Oxford, 1892), Trench, *English Past and Present* (14th ed., revised by Mayhew, London, 1898), Whitney, *Life and Growth of Language* (Appleton, 1875).



Greek, but Hebrew—product of the spiritual movement which has made the Bible. The evolution of our modern life rests upon the gradual intermingling of these Hellenic and Hebraic elements.

Again, not every language when it has fallen into the earth abides alone. From the grave a new generation in kind may issue forth, with abundant life. Sanskrit, the classical language of India, is dead, but the kindred dialects that have sprung up in its place are myriad. French, Italian, Spanish, the galaxy of Romance languages, are severally the developed dialects of folk-Latin which was established in those regions by the Roman warriors.

So a language may live on in its descendants. And the Genius of Language does not, in the ordinary course of events, abandon its ancestors to utter oblivion. Useless words and forms are sloughed off; new additions are made. An organism, and not a mechanism, a living language is continually vibrating with energy. But even in the case of an indigenous language the essential mechanism of its grammar and the bulk of its commonest words are usually a heritage from the dead past; change and decay do not seriously affect the skeleton. And a dead language, whose words and integral parts are constant in form and significance, is of great importance to linguistic science, if we are to study the anatomy, the growth and structure, as well as the outward features and vital forces of a living language.

I am not here to bury Caesar or to praise him. Of language ancestry I sing, and I invite your attention to our English—or shall I say barbaric—forebears. If we were to fix the horizon of modern English, it would perhaps be about the year 1500, when the effects of the introduction of printing had begun to be felt in England. Chaucer, who died about three-quarters of a century earlier, had fixed the English literary dialect when he chose the Mercian, or Midland, his native London form of speech. The discovery of the New World had profoundly stimulated men's minds, and the language was about to set out on the most glorious period of its development under Tyndal, Shakspeare, Dryden, Swift, Johnson, Coleridge, and Macaulay.

If, standing at a point in this horizon, we were to scan the long vista of the formative period of our language, one fact in particular



would impress itself on our minds—English was in former times an inflected language. It made use of formative suffixes in adjective, noun, and verb to indicate the logical relation of words within the sentence. Modern German does this, and Russian, but French and most of the European languages, like English only to a much slighter degree, have modified or leveled their inflections, owing to the “analytic” tendency in language, and have developed prepositions and verb auxiliaries to take their place. Word-order has come to be the significant feature of syntax.

This remarkable change in the form of English was partly natural and gradual. It was partly cataclysmal and for historical reasons which we shall only hastily review. Intermittently from 55 B.C. to 411 A.D. Roman legions held the island of Britain, and the Latin language was used in the towns. St. Augustine and his confrères at the close of the sixth century introduced a few ecclesiastical terms, but Latin did not gain a considerable hold on the island in the earliest period of our language. The Roman legions had withdrawn for the last time when the Angles, Jutes, and Saxons, our ancestors in line, crossed over from Schleswig in Germany. In four centuries of occupation the aggressors covered almost the whole island, having subjugated the native population so completely that scarce a half-dozen Celtic words are to be found in modern English to remind us of the primitive inhabitants. Their erstwhile brethren of the North, the Danes, invaded Britain in 870. The stratification of early English records no small deposit of Scandinavian words. Then there was the terrific impact of the Norman Conquest. For nearly a century the supremacy of the English language hung in the balance. But Normandy was lost in Northern France, and the foreign lords of Britain became more tolerant of local customs and manners of speech. England looked like home to them. Race mixture produced dialect mixture. The submerged vernacular reappeared and came to constitute the body of the language.

One result of the Norman-French infusion into English was an extensive borrowing of Central French words in the following century. In like manner, at a later period, the impetus given by the Revival of Learning caused English men of letters to draw without



stint from Latin, mother of French, and from Greek models. These later French and classical additions of English were "learned" words, and they did not become domesticated so rapidly as the Scandinavian and Norman-French elements. So extensive, however, were the ingraftings on the Anglo-Saxon stock, so desperate was the struggle for existence during the formative period of our language, that the power of development from within—from internal linguistic resources—was once and for all lost. The natural well-spring of our language was estopped. The habit of borrowing became fixed. Our supply of words continues to be replenished, in the main, directly from abroad, or from formative elements of foreign origin.

"I trade," says Dryden, "with the living and the dead for the enrichment of our native language." The loan-words in English were naturalized—by an interesting process which cannot detain us here—and there was almost complete fusion with the native element. No modern language is wholly free from the infection of borrowed words, and perhaps they are not altogether a detriment. Students of language have admired the richness and flexibility of English, pronouncing it no mean instrument of expression. But the native strain in our language is, we repeat, Teutonic. The homespun element is the warp and woof of our linguistic web. The grammatical forms, the verbal system, the declension of nouns and pronouns, the comparison of adjectives, and most of the purely relational words, such as simple adverbs, prepositions, and conjunctions, are native. The words for numbers below a million, and the ordinals, except second, have always been in the language. "Anglo-Saxon" we call this native core of our language, unmodified by subsequent accretions from Scandinavian, Norman-French, and classical sources.

Philologists tell us the Anglo-Saxons spoke a Low German tongue, cognate with Icelandic, Old Frisian, and Old High German—members all of the Teutonic branch of the Indo-European family of languages. Besides the features of inflection, our language inherited the general family characteristic of vowel variation in the body of a word—to indicate change in part of speech, or in number or tense. To put it another way, the categories of case,



number, person, mood, and tense, and the types of so-called "irregular" nouns and verbs, are found already well developed in Gothic, the oldest of the group of languages to which English belongs, and hence must have descended to us from the parent Indo-European.

The Teutonic group, as compared with the primitive language, featured a characteristic succession of consonants, a changed word-accent which was fixed on the root syllable, a twofold declension of nouns and adjectives, and a peculiar system of verb inflection. The bulk of loan-words in English, except those from our kinsmen, the Scandinavians, belonged to groups cognate with English, and to two in particular, the Italic and the Hellenic. With other branches of the Indo-European family, the Celtic, the Balto-Slavic, the Indo-Iranian, we have little in common except the general family characteristics aforementioned. From other families of language, particularly the Semitic, have come small but important deposits of words, along with those special contributions to civilization—the Hebrew Scriptures, the Phoenician alphabet, the Arabic system of notation, Chaldean and Egyptian science.

Since the discovery of Sanskrit the Indo-European family of languages (variously called Indo-Germanic, Aryan) has been a subject of study—Eldorado of philologists. A writer on the subject says:

There is no doubt that the eight groups of this family go back to one original language, and from a comparison of the forms in these various languages we are able to ascertain what the original form in the primitive Indo-European language may have been. Unfortunately we cannot bring our induction to the test by comparing the hypothetical form with the genuine, for not one word of this original tongue has come down to us. Our knowledge of the original home is equally meager. . . . Perhaps no peoples have wandered so much to and fro upon the face of the earth as the Indo-Europeans; at the dawn of the historic period we find the Indo-Iranian, the Slavonic, the Germanic, the Celtic races in a state of migration.<sup>1</sup>

A few years ago it was the common belief that the original home was somewhere in Central or Northern Europe. But the recent discovery of documents in the Tokhari language, spoken by tribes

<sup>1</sup> Giles, *Manual of Comparative Philology*, pp. 22, 23.



in what is now Chinese Turkestan, has caused many to regard a European home as unlikely, and to revert to the previous theory of an Asiatic home.

A comparison of the peculiarities of each language shows that the primitive people must have diverged gradually at first, these divergences later increasing into extensive migrations. Local differences of dialect became more marked, and the several languages, developing in isolation, became mutually unintelligible. It is only in comparatively recent times that their kinship has been re-established. One important result of this interesting work of reconstruction has been that we no longer regard one language of this great group as being vastly older than another. Sanskrit is the elder sister of Greek and Latin, not the mother, as was formerly supposed. Latin is not derived from Greek, but is cognate with it; and for the native strain in English we claim equally direct descent.

"We find that many words were known to several of the Indo-Germanic groups," says Skeat, "and are to be found in Asia as well as Europe." He distributes them into categories, as follows:

(a) Terms of relationship, and the like: brother, daughter, father, mother, sister; kin, widow, and guest. (b) Parts of the body, and the like: arm, brow, chin, ear, elbow, foot, heart, knee, marrow, navel, nose, tooth; tear (sb.), udder (of a cow). (c) Birds and animals: beaver, crane, cow, ewe, goose, hart, hound, mouse, sow, steer; feather (of a bird), horn (of an animal), wool. (d) Seasons: day, harvest, night, year. Natural objects and the like: apple, birch, bough, east, frost, light, moon, star, stream, tree, water, wind. (e) Home and employments: acre, axle, door, dough, lea, mark (a boundary), mead, nave (of a wheel), thatch, timber, wain, work, yard (a court), yeast, yoke. (f) Miscellaneous substantives: bottom, life, loan, love, meed, mind, murder, name, speed, sweat, thirst. (g) Some adjectives: foul, full, lief, light, loud, mid, naked, new, quick, raw, red, right, same, sweet, tame, thin, warm, yellow, young. (h) Numerals: eight, five, four, hundred, nine, one, seven, six, ten, three, two. (i) Pronouns: I, me, that, thou, what, who, ye (you). Adverb: now. Preposition: of (off). (k) Verbs: am, are, be, is, was; also: bear, bid, bind, choose, do, ear (plough), eat, fare, know, lean, lick, lie (recline), live, milk, reave, sew, sit, spurn, stand, tear, wax (grow), weigh, will, win, work, worth (become), yearn.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Science of Etymology*, p. 202.



The list is not intended to be exhaustive, but it shows sufficiently the character of the language material which our primitive ancestors possessed. From such a deposit of words, determined by mutual correspondences in form and meaning, must be derived the scant inferences regarding the history and civilization of this remote period. It is generally agreed that there are three main "stages" in the development of a language from a lower to a higher form: the isolating (or monosyllabic), the agglutinative (or polysynthetic), and the inflectional. Sanscrit, Greek, Latin, and Gothic, worthy dead of our linguistic ancestry, are known to have been highly inflectional. In times prehistoric, then, the Indo-European languages must have passed through the first two stages into the inflectional. It is likely that English (and, indeed, most of the great modern languages) is now in a fourth or "analytic" stage of development, where the tendency is to break down inflections and develop auxiliary words to facilitate expression.

Comparative philology does not attempt to fix exact limits for the period when the Indo-European family was an undivided whole. The Vedic hymns of Sanscrit constitute the oldest literary records. An authority remarks that the parent people "were still in the Stone Age for the most part, though copper was beginning to come in, and the time must therefore have been not later than 2500 B.C."

The region inhabited is supposed to have been a varied one, not bordering the sea. Winter is the most common term for season. The loosely organized tribes wandered about over the grasslands tending their cattle and sheep. Yet some of the tribes had adopted a settled mode of life, possessing fields which they tilled. They had wheeled carts, and knew the use of the plow. Barley, and possibly wheat, was used to make bread. The art of weaving (from wool and hemp) was practiced. The horse and the ox had been domesticated. They dreaded the ravages of the bear and the wolf among their flocks; the mouse was even then a domestic pest. There were towns and fortified places. Knowing the use of certain metals, they made themselves primitive weapons of offense and defense. Of government and organization they probably knew little. Terms denoting various degrees of family



relationship were well developed and "were significant of affectionate regard and trustful interdependence" (Whitney). A highly gifted and imaginative people, they appear to have early displayed the qualities which were to enable them to exert a vast influence on civilization.

Breasted records the gradual assembling of the Semitic nomads on what he calls the "fertile crescent" of the Arabian desert, and then traces the slow southern advance of the hosts of the Indo-Europeans from Central Europe behind the Balkans, from the steppes of Southern Russia, and from far into Asia east of the Caspian Sea.

The history of the ancient world is largely made up of the struggle between this southern Semitic line which issued from the southern grasslands, and the northern Indo-European line which came forth from the northern grasslands to confront the older civilization represented in the southern line. Thus we see the two great races facing each other across the Mediterranean like two vast armies stretching from western Asia westward to the Atlantic. The later wars of Rome and Carthage represent some of the operations on the Semitic left wing; while the triumph of Persia over Chaldea is a similar outcome on the Semitic right wing. The result of the imposing struggle was the complete triumph of our ancestors, the Indo-European line, which conquered along the center and both wings and gained unchallenged supremacy throughout the Mediterranean world under the Greeks and the Romans. This triumph was accompanied by a long struggle for the mastery between members of the northern line themselves, as first the Persians, then the Greeks, and finally the Romans, gained complete control of the Mediterranean and oriental world. The great civilized peoples of Europe at the present day are the offspring of the victorious Indo-European line.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Robinson and Breasted, *Outlines of European History*, Part I, p. 87. See chaps. iii and iv.